

Non-Catholics at the table: now or never?

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In 1888 Colonel van Aefferden wished, not unnaturally, to be buried in Roermond beside his wife, but law and fear of scandal prevented it. He was a Protestant and could not be buried in a Catholic cemetery; she a Catholic could only await the resurrection alongside Catholics. The result is a most unusual pair of tombstones. Set back to back, either side of the denomination-demarcating wall, they clasp hands in stone over the wall. The monument cocked a snook at the bitter divisions of the time, made a mute but powerful statement that reality is more complex than legally-defined categories, and, given that it's a grave marker, asserted that Christian divisions are a legacy of past blunders rather than something of eschatological value.

I was reminded of these linked tombstones when I heard the latest round, this time from Germany, in the search for an answer to the question 'can a non-Catholic share in the table at a Catholic Eucharist?' I use the form 'share in the table' because the more common 'take communion' or 'receive communion' itself employs the category of the Eucharist as a sacred commodity that Vatican II sought to move beyond in declaring that the Eucharist 'is an action of Christ himself and the church' (Canon 899,1). The German bishops used the phrase that 'Eucharistic communion and church fellowship belong together' and so could not see any way towards an open invitation. They then fell back on a legal framework of 'grave spiritual need,' one-off 'admittance' using the 'internal forum' and leaving it to the discretion of individual bishops. It is all so reminiscent of the debates following *One Bread One Body* in 1998. Apart from the fact that few except canonists understand all the ins-and-outs of these 'solutions,' the whole approach leaves many just feeling tired. Some do enjoy using the issue as a political football between liberal and conservative wings of the church; alas, whenever the Eucharist is thus used, as it has often been, it is the faith of the whole People of God that suffers. Others, remembering that once you start

debating what 'grave' means, know that it is no answer at all. Meanwhile those outside Catholicism are often scandalised either by the notion that anyone should act so proprietarily about the table at which all are guests or by the casuistic approach to a mystery. I well remember the Anglican who was shocked at the logic chopping when told she could not receive in her husband's parish on a Sunday but that she could when holidaying in Spain provided she was 'morally certain' she could not find an Anglican celebration!

This exasperation could be heard in the voice of the Lutheran woman who asked the Pope in 2015 if there could be movement on sharing the Lord's Supper? The Pope's reply was to ask himself: "Is sharing the Lord's Supper the end of a journey or is it the viaticum for walking together?" I leave the question to the theologians, to those who understand.' This is significant in two respects. First, the logic of *One Bread One Body* and some more recent statements is, in effect, eschatological: only when we have perfect communion can we have sacramental sharing – but that such fellowship belongs to the same moment on the future horizon when sacraments cease. The pope's mention of viaticum and then of a common baptism takes the opposite tack. Second, the widespread opinion that this was a question closed for theological discussion is not one shared by Pope Francis: he explicitly invites new studies of the issue. So what new approaches could be considered?

Sisters / Brothers in the Spirit

We humans continuously form fictive families. We speak of human fraternity; being welcomed as one of the family; any nation that speaks of fraternity and equality views itself as a notional family; while a great leader is 'the mother' or 'father of the nation.' The language of 'family' is often the highest value rhetoric that groupings, large and small, wish to apply to themselves. A monastery is an outstanding case of the fictive family theme with the abbess/abbot (from *abba* = father) and the sisters / brothers. But even these fictive families at the heart of our tradition are but reflections of the fictive family that is the liturgy. There we join as brothers and sisters, act as a family, and are commanded to engage in eucharistic activity as a family: *Orate fratres*. The liturgy-performing family is, to outsiders, simply a ritual manifestation of an anthropological phenomenon.

But to us, it is the work of the Spirit who transforms us from being a random collection of individuals with shared ideas into a single family who, as sisters and brothers, cry out 'Abba, Father' (cf. Gal 4:6). Our family ties are not merely some legal consequence of our common baptism, but the creating work of the Spirit, there and then, when we actually gather. The transforming Spirit is active in our gatherings, each and every one of them, linking us to every other member of the gathering and empowering our worship.

If the Spirit has made each of us, all baptised, into sisters and brothers, is it appropriate that we would exclude any member of the Spirit-formed family from full participation in the very activity for which the Spirit has transformed us?

The Grammar of Meals

There are some things in life we cannot change; and facing this fact – dull as it seems – is, for me, part of being an adult. I must have nourishment and hydration, or I die. But nourishment involves my acting in society: only through human teamwork can we eat. Robinson Crusoe, the ideal individualist, is a great story, but entirely fanciful. Just as we work together to gather food, so we collaborate to cook it. If you live alone in a bed-sit there is still the network that made the cooker and generated the electricity! The fact is that humans do not simply eat together, we share meals. Indeed, it is this meal-*sharing* that is distinctively human. We may act in pacts as hunter – gatherers, but we eat as meal sharers with a culture. Moreover, there is an inherent structure to this sharing which we can label 'the grammar of meals.' Even in the most elaborate meal with imposed conventions, there are basic codes that are common human property – and when they are transgressed we both know it and know that there is something wrong. A simple example is that we place common food mid-way between the sharers, we stretch the food so that all get a share and have conventions about guests such as 'family hold back.'

This has implications for liturgy because the Eucharist has, to say the least, the form of a meal, and so the grammar of meals applies. Can I allow you to be present at our meal and then refuse to share the food with you? Can you be at the table and not be offered food to eat and a cup to drink? If you are at the table and

refuse my offer, I will be offended and wonder why you are there at all. Likewise, if you are there and express a willingness to eat, then can I be a human host of the divine banquet and respond with what would be brutish behaviour anywhere else? Because we confess that we can be elbow to elbow with the Lord around his eucharistic table, we have to accept that the grammar of meals applies there.

... on earth, as it is in heaven ...

Each day we pray, in the present tense, that the Father's 'will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.' Moreover, we see any expression of this will being an anticipation of the End. Constituted as a community of memory, Christianity is unremittingly future-focused. What we pray for now is that which we shall enjoy in its fullness in heaven. Moreover, we instantiate this in the Eucharist when refer to it as 'the promise / taster of future glory.' We normally think of this relationship in terms of the present leading to the future, but in liturgy – as the sacramental presence of the future now – the future also determines the present.

So, will non-Catholic Christians have a full share in the heavenly banquet? If you answer 'no'; then that solves the problem: they should be excluded now. If you reply 'yes' (see, for example, Mt 8:11 and Lk 13:29 for two expressions of this theme in the kerygma); then it is that heavenly table which we should be imitating next Sunday. Moreover, such an approach would enhance our mission showing that the Good News creates a space of gracious welcome. It would remind us that in the liturgy we perform the unified world we want to see; we do not simply reinforce the fractured world we have inherited.